DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 128 CS 008 848

AUTHOR Wood, Nancy V.
TITLE Standardized Reading Tests and the Postsecondary Reading Curriculum.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western College Reading and Learning Association (28th, Albuquerque, NM, April 9-12, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Testing; Educational Testing; Group Testing; Higher Education; *Predictive Measurement; Reading Ability; *Reading Diagnosis; Reading Instruction; Reading Research; Reading Skills; *Reading Tests; *Standardized Tests; *Testing Problems; Test Reviews; *Test Validity
IDENTIFIERS Degrees of Reading Power; Descriptive Tests of Language Skills; Nelson Denny Reading Tests; New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test

ABSTRACT

To help college reading teachers develop an awareness of what standardized reading tests do and do not reveal about students' reading abilities, a study examined the testing of reading and criticized four major standardized tests. Results indicated that reading is tested through (1) reading passages accompanied by multiple choice questions, (2) cloze tests, (3) retelling a passage, (4) reading aloud, (5) reading and reasoning aloud, (6) informal reading inventories, (7) tests measuring the affective domain, and (8) vocabulary tests. Results also indicated that all of the four most popular standardized tests have problems. First, the multiple-choice Nelson Denny Reading Test measures reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and reading rate. Critics, however, say that the passages are too hard, time limits are unrealistic, and the test does not successfully predict academic success. Second, the Descriptive Test of Language Skills, Reading Comprehension Test is a timed multiple-choice test that includes scores for understanding main ideas, understanding direct statements, and drawing inferences. It is much easier than the Nelson Denny but ignores important academic skills. Third, the Degrees of Reading Power Test is untimed, uses the cloze technique, and reports scores in Degrees of Reading Power units instead of grade levels. Its main fault is that it tests the product of reading (comprehension) rather than the reading process. Fourth, the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test, Reading Comprehension, is intended to test the skills necessary for college success, and is multiple choice and timed. Though comprehensive, it does not test sustained reading. The results suggest that no test adequately measures subtle reading skills in context, and thus they should only be used to measure gross reading ability. (SKC)

ED288128

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Standardized Reading Tests and the Postsecondary Reading Curriculum

Nancy V. Wood

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Nancy V. Wood

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS008140

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Standardized Reading Tests and the Postsecondary Reading Curriculum

New approaches to teaching college reading have changed the way that many of us teach in recent years. In particular, we now teach students to understand the reading process, to monitor comprehension, and to interact with the text. As a result of such teaching, we are becoming increasingly aware of and responsive to the idiosyncracies of individual comprehension. We also teach a variety of study skills and reading strategies that are designed not only to help students comprehend but also to learn and remember what they read. Many of these new approaches, as well as the special skills and strategies that we teach, are not and perhaps cannot be tested by current standardized reading tests. Yet, many reading programs rely on standardized tests for pre and post testing to measure the effectiveness of instruction.

We not only need to develop an awareness of what the scores on standardized reading tests tell us, but also what they do not tell us, both about our students' reading ability and about the effectiveness of our instruction if we are to report their results fairly and accurately. It is especially important that we not allow current standardized reading tests to drive our reading curriculum. Current tests are so limited in scope that they can dangerously limit what we teach in reading classes if we direct our teaching mainly to score improvement.

Curtis and Glaser (1983), Hansche and Gordon (1984), and Marr (1983), among others, have written about the difficulties involved in testing reading. Testing reading is not a perfectly

developed process because it is so difficult. We cannot see what is happening when people read. Furthermore, the result of reading is an intensely private product, difficult to understand and objectify for outside evaluation. Other basic skills are easier to measure. Students are asked to write to test writing skills and work problems to test math skills. We can see the results of these efforts and judge them. Testing reading is more complicated, however, and we resort to various ways to test it.

There are, in fact, at least eight different ways that reading is traditionally tested. The most popular method is the reading passage accompanied by multiple choice questions. According to one recent study, about 70% of the tests now being used to measure competency in reading are of this type (Gambrell, 1985). There are problems with this testing method, however. Readers must see what the tester wants them to see, which is often literal, factual information, easy to locate in the text without careful reading. Also, multiple choice tests do not test the reader's background information and past experience. These tests are, in fact, often criticized for testing little more than the reader's ability to answer multiple choice questions.

The second most popular way to test reading is with cloze tests. In these tests, every fifth or seventh word is omitted, and the reader's task is to fill in the blanks. The reader must pay close attention to context and think like the writer in order to accomplish this. Multiple choice cloze tests provide word choices in the margin. Cloze presents problems, also. Ashby-Davis (1985) suggests that cloze tests the ability to write as

well as to read and that good readers who cannot write well do poorly on such tests. Even though some people argue that the cloze testing method is the closest we have to the actual reading process, others argue that it is not. In completing a cloze test readers cannot scan, for instance, to understand the arrangement of ideas before reading.

Retelling is another method for testing reading. After reading a passage, the reader looks away to summarize or retell it in as much detail as possible. Problems with this method include the time involved and scoring. Scoring can be simplified, however. For example, written retellings can be scored according to rubrics such as those often devised for the holistic grading of writing tests (Smith & Jackson, 1985) or according to other, slightly more elaborate methods (Kalmback, 1986).

Reading aloud is also used to test reading ability. Test givers must be taught to recognize typical problems and miscues and to count them so that a score can be assigned. The time required to do such testing, the special training required of test givers, and the limitations on what we can learn about comprehension on many of these tests are all problems with this method.

Reading and reasoning aloud gives a more accurate evaluation of comprehension than does simply reading aloud (Whimbey & Glade, 1982). The reader is required to stop periodically and talk about how he or she is processing, associating, or applying the information in the read material. Adequate time is required for such tests as well as skilled test givers. Pearson

(1986) in his keynote speech at the National Reading Conference spoke in favor of such testing methods. He calls them structured interviews or talk alouds.

The informal reading inventory is often used by classroom instructors to determine which students can handle the reading assignments. A text passage, usually from the textbook, is extracted and open-ended questions are prepared. All students in the class read and answer the questions. The instructor reads the responses to see how well individual students understand the material. Such testing works well for particular classes, but it is not a practical method for testing an entire entering freshman class.

Tests that measure the affective domain or how the student feels about reading are also available. Some reading instructors argue that this is the most important factor in successful reading instruction, and that we need to test and then deal with feelings if we are to teach effectively.

Finally, there are various types of vocabulary tests that are also used to measure reading comprehension. These descriptions of some of the common methods for testing reading suggest the complicated nature of this process. Reading testing can also be controversial both because there seems to be no totally reliable way of doing it and because it can potentially place severe and artificial limits on the reading curriculum.

In the remainder of this paper four popular and widely-used standardized reading tests will be described along with some of the problems associated with each of them. These tests include the

Nelson-Denny Reading Test (1960, 1973, 1981), the Descriptive Test of Language Skills, Reading Comprehension Test (1979), the Degrees of Reading Power Test (1980) and the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test, Reading Comprehension (1984). The final objective in examining these four tests is not only to focus on what they do or do not tell us about our students' reading ability, but also to examine their potential influence on the reading curriculum, particularly when we use them to measure the effectiveness of our instruction.

There are six versions of the Nelson-Denny Reading test: A & B, C & D, and E & F. The tests have been published in pairs since 1929 to encourage their use for pre and post testing. All versions follow the same format and supposedly can be used interchangably. The test authors in the Examiner's Manual for Forms E and F say that the Nelson-Denny test, which is strictly timed, provides "a trustworthy ranking of student ability in three areas of academic achievement: reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and reading rate". Futhermore, they say, "These are the three most important skills involved in the reading process and are related and interdependent" (1981, p.1). Many current college reading instructors would find this to be an extremely limited description of the reading process, especially when it is compared with the course description and instruction in many current college reading classes. The authors go on to say that the tests may be used as pre and post measures of student growth and of the effectiveness of instruction. They further recommend that these tests be used to screen and place both superior and remedial or developmental students, to predict

success in college classes, and to diagnose reading weaknesses (pp. 6-10).

The Nelson-Denny Reading test is the most-used standardized reading test in colleges throughout the nation. A recent survey conducted by the Southern Regional Education Board on remedial and developmental education, in which questionnaires were received from 404 or 83% of the 2 and 4 year colleges in the 15 southern states surveyed, shows that the Nelson-Denny is the most frequently used test in all of the basic skills areas in these institutions. One hundred twenty-one institutions say that they use it, even though there is no general agreement on the cut-off scores used for placment (1987, pp. 39-42).

Criticism of the Nelson-Denny includes complaints that the passages are too hard, that the time limits are unrealistic, that the normative data is poor because the tests were first normed with advanced students, that the test is not good for measuring gains, although it is often used in this way, that it does not predict academic success as well as high school rank does, and that it has a very limited use for diagnosis (Perkins 1984).

Cummins, in his review of Forms E & F, cites a study that shows that students can do well on this test by simply reading the questions and then looking for the answers, and that, as a consequence, the test does not effectively measure gains in reading ability (1981, pp. 55-56). Cummins cites another study that suggests that students can be taught specific test taking strategies to improve their scores without any accompanying instruction to improve their reading (pp. 56-57). Perkins also

quotes other studies that show that Nelson-Denny test results do not correlate with other standardized reading test results (pp. 66-68).

The Descriptive Test of Language Skills, Reading Comprehension Test, is one of the MAPS series of basic skills tests that is used in both two and four year colleges. In their booklet, How Maps Can Help You with Placement, the test publishers state, "Scores on this test distinguish between students who are adequately prepared for entry-level college classes and those who need developmental work" (1980, p. 8). This test, like the Nelson-Denny, is a timed, multiple choice test that contains forty-five four-item questions on fifteen short passages. It produces cluster scores for three areas: understanding main ideas, understanding direct statements, and drawing inferences. It is an easier test than the Nelson-Denny because the subjects of the passages are more likely to be familiar to student readers, and they are shorter.

The test publishers also claim that the scores on the Descriptive Test of Language Skills indicate strengths and weaknesses in the three areas for which it produces cluster scores (p. 8). It is implied that students who are not able to understand main ideas, understand direct statements, and draw inferences need to be taught these skills so that they will then be adequately prepared for college. Again, most college reading instructors would now agree that limiting the instruction in our college reading classes to these three topics would not adequately prepare students for the reading they must do as college students.

The Degrees of Reading Power test is quite different from those just described. It is a multiple choice, cloze test that contains 325 word passages with seven words omitted throughout the passage. Futhermore, five choices for each omitted word are supplied in the margin. There is no time limit. Many students take 30-45 minutes to complete this test, and others need an hour and a half or more. Versions of this test are available at all levels from K through college.

The test publishers in the Users Guide, PA Series claim that the test measures only a student's ability to read prose at different levels of difficulty. Students must consider context and understand the surrounding prose to select the correct answers. Furthermore, they do not need to rely on memory or past experience to answer correctly since all of the necessary content information is in the text. Thus, the test is relatively free of cultural bias. All response options are common words. Wrong answers occur because students are not reading and comprehending, not because they do not know a vocabulary word. When the whole passage becomes too difficult for a student to read, then the student will not be able to select correct answers (1983, pp. 4-5).

The score on this test is reported in DRP units instead of the traditional grade levels used by the Nelson-Denny. Also provided with the test is a formula for determining the readability of various types of prose which is also measured in DRP units. The idea is to provide information that will help instructors match readers with appropriate texts.

Recommended uses of the Degrees of Reading Power Test are to evaluate achievement to find out what level of prose students are able to read independently, with help, or with frustration. Three separate scores are reported for these three levels of comprehension. Also, the test can be used to measure growth in ability or to indicate the need for compensatory or remedial help. (Users Guide, PA Series, p. 4).

The test has been reviewed positively by Kibby who predicts that by the end of the 1980's nearly all reading tests will be like this one (1981, p. 417). Other critics find problems with this test. Carver (1985) claims that the Degrees of Reading Power test is good for testing students' ability to read and comprehend, that the readability formula is good for describing the readability of texts, but that the system breaks down when readers are matched with texts. In an answer to Carver, Rankin (1986) criticizes him for using only scores at the instructional level for his analysis and claims that a valid reader-text match can be made by using a total system that includes all test scores, readability values, and professional judgment. Bormouth (1985) believes that, contrary to the claims of the test publishers, readers' background and prior knowledge do make a difference in performance on this test. Burrill, Ritchey and Helm (1987) give a fair and accurate description of what the Degrees of Reading Power test can and cannot accomplish in assessing reading ability: "Assessment is focused on determining how well the reader 'processes' or constructs meaning -- how well the messages in text are understood. DRP tests do not assess the 'products' of reading -- the ability to

go beyond the written text, to make, for example, evaluative judgments about the message. Thus, they measure what might be termed 'minimally inferential' comprehension -- a necessary, though not sufficient, prerequisite to other higher-order cognitive abilities" (p. 2).

The New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test, Reading Comprehension is one of a series of tests administered to all entering freshmen in New Jersey. These tests are now published and may be purchased and used outside of New Jersey. According to a report by the New Jersey Basic Skills Council (1985), the tests in this series, developed by groups of faculty and high school teachers in New Jersey, are not meant to test basic survival and coping skills but to test the skills necessary to read college textbooks, write college papers, solve mathematical problems, and succeed in a technological society (p. 37). The Reading Comprehension Test contains 37 short, multiple choice questions, and it is timed. It measures the ability to understand what a text says, to extract the main idea, and to draw appropriate inferences (p. 38). There are also questions on this test about the relationships among sentences, the difference between general and specific ideas, the function of sentences within the text, and the author's purpose, tone, beliefs, and assumptions. Some questions test the reader's ability to predict what is coming next. The publishers of this test claim that it represents "the state of the art" in standardized multiple choice reading tests because it does require more analysis and close, detailed reading than do other tests of its type. Still,

students are not required to do the sustained reading that they must do for the Degrees of Reading Power test and, like other standardized reading tests, it does not test many of the topics that we teach in our reading classes.

Now let us return to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper, the questions that we must ask when we report or use the scores from these or other standardized reading tests. These questions include: What can we learn about students' reading ability from these tests? What are we not able to learn from these tests? and What are the implications of these scores for the reading curriuclum, particularly if post scores are used to measure the effectiveness of our instruction? How much are we obligated to teach to the reading test, and how much to teach beyond the test?

It was suggested at the beginning of this paper that there are a number of topics, skills, and abilities in the present reading curriculum that are not tested by current reading tests. No pre-reading skills are tested, for example. These include previewing, backgrounding, setting a purpose for reading, and making initial judgments about the text. There are no titles, no author or author information, and no purpose, other than to take the test, provided with current standardized reading tests. Students' background information and familiarity with the language in the passages is not tested by these tests.

Post-reading skills are not tested either. Reciting, reflecting, reviewing, resaying, and checking one's own understanding are often taught in our classes but are not tested by standardized reading tests.

Other active reading strategies that we teach students to help them process and comprehend a text are almost never tested by these tests in a systematic and comprehensive manner. These include asking questions, marking passages, summarizing and restating the main points, analyzing the organization of a passage, outlining or mapping the organization, analyzing the functions of paragraphs, predicting outcomes, and analyzing the author's tone, purpose, and style. Skill in skimming, scanning, and selective reading are usually not tested either. The Iowa Silent Reading test, Level II, attempts to test skimming, scanning, and directed reading. This is not a common practice, however, on standardized reading tests. Critical reading skills such as analyzing the authors' motives and bias, distinguishing fact from opinion, and making value judgments about the text are not tested. And, finally, the personal value that the reader assigns to the text is not tested by these tests.

Current standardized reading tests can only be used as a gross measure of students' ability to read at the most literal levels of comprehension. They test such a limited part of what most of us teach in reading classes, that when we give them as post tests, we must remind ourselves, our administrators, and our students that they by no means measure all that students have been taught or are able to do. In fact, if we limit our teaching to improving the scores on these tests, we will not be providing our students with the skills and abilities they need to perform college reading tasks effectively.

REFERENCES

Ashby-Davis, Claire. "Cloze and Comprehension: A Qualitative Analysis and Critique." Journal of Reading, Vol. 28 (April, 1985), pp. 585-589.

Bormuth, John R. "A Response to 'Is the Degrees of Reading Power Test Valid or Invalid?'" Journal of Reading, Vol. 28 (October, 1985), pp. 42-47.

Brown, James I., Bennet, J. Michael, & Hanna, Gerald. Examiner's Manual: The Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Forms E and F. Chicago: Riverside Publishing Company, 1981.

Brown, James I., Bennet, J. Michael, & Hanna, Gerald. The Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Forms E and F. Chicago: Riverside Publishing Company, 1981.

Brown, James I., Nelson, M. J., & Denny, E. C. The Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Forms C and D. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976.

Brown, James I., Nelson, M. J., & Denny, E. C. The Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Forms A and B (rev. ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960. (Original work published by Nelson, M. J. and Denny, E. C., 1929).

Burrill, Lois E., Ritchey, Joyce, & Helm, Phoebe. "Pilot Study at El Paso Community College: A Comparison of the DRP Test and Nelson-Denny Tests." Paper presented at the Western College Reading and Learning Association Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico, April, 1987.

Carver, Ronald P. "Is the Degrees of Reading Power Test Valid or Invalid?" Journal of Reading, Vol. 28 (October, 1985), pp. 34-41.

Cummins, R. Porter. "Test Review: The Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Forms E and F." Journal of Reading, Vol. 24 (October, 1981), pp. 54-59.

Curtis, Mary E. & Glaser, Robert. "Reading Theory and the Assessment of Reading Achievement." Journal of Educational Measurement, Vol. 20 (Summer, 1983), pp. 133-147.

Degrees of Reading Power, PA and CP series. New York: The College Board, 1980.

Descriptive Tests of Language Skills, Reading Comprehension. New York: The College Board, 1979.

Gambrell, Linda B. "Minimum Competency Testing and Programs in Reading: A Survey of the United States." Journal of Reading, Vol. 28 (May, 1985), pp. 735-738.

Mansche, Linda & Gordon, Belita. "An Investigation of Types of Distractors for Reading Comprehension Test Items." In the Thirty-third Yearbook of the National Reading Conference. New York: The National Reading Conference, Inc., 1984.

How MAPS Can Help You with Placement. New York: The College Board, 1980.

Kalmbach, James R. "Evaluating Informal Methods for the Assessment of Retellings." Journal of Reading, Vol. 30 (November, 1986), pp. 119-127.

Kibby, Michael W. "Test Review, The Degrees of Reading Power." Journal of Reading, Vol. 24 (February, 1981), pp. 416-427.

Marr, Mary Beth. "An Analysis of Text Variables in Three Current Reading Diagnostic Tests." In the Thirty-second Yearbook of the National Reading Conference. New York: The National Reading Conference, Inc., 1983.

New Jersey Basic Skills Council. Results of the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Testing. Trenton, N.J.: New Jersey Department of Higher Education, 1985.

New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test, Reading Comprehension. New York: The College Board, 1984.

Pearson, P. David. "Assessment, Accountability and Professional Prerogative." Paper presented at the National Reading Conference, Austin, Texas, December, 1986.

Perkins, Dorothy. "Assessment of the Use of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test." Forum for Reading, Vol. 15 (Spring/Summer, 1984), pp. 64-69.

Rankin, Earl F. "The Validity of the Degrees of Reading Power Test: A Response to Carver's Critique." In the North Central Reading Association Yearbook, 1986.

Report on College-Level Remedial/Developmental Programs in SREB States. Atlanta, Georgia: Southern Regional Education Board, 1986.

Smith, Sharon P. & Jackson, Janet H. "Assessing Reading/Learning Skills with Written Retellings." Journal of Reading, Vol. 28 (April, 1985), pp. 622-630.

Users Guide for the Degrees of Reading Power Test, PA series. New York: The College Board, 1983.

Whimbey, Arthur & Glade, John. Analytical Reasoning and Reading Comprehension. In New Directions for College Learning Assistance. Improving Reading and Study Skills, edited by A.S. Algier and K. W. Algier. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982.